



## Frequently Asked Questions about Gonorrhea

### What is gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is a very common *sexually transmitted disease* (STD). This means that it is a disease that you get by having sex with someone who already has gonorrhea. The disease is caused by the *gonococcus* bacteria that can multiply and grow in moist, warm areas of the body. In women, gonorrhea can infect the *cervix* (opening to the uterus, or womb), *uterus* (womb), and *fallopian tubes* (tubes that carry eggs from the ovary to the uterus). It can also infect the *urethra* (urine canal) in men and women, as well as the mouth, throat, and rectum. Gonorrhea can be treated and cured by antibiotics. But, you can get the disease more than once – antibiotics will not protect you from getting gonorrhea again. This STD can cause serious and long lasting health problems in both women and men. And, if you have gonorrhea, you are more likely to become infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, if you are exposed to the virus.

### How do you get gonorrhea?

This STD is spread through any kind of sexual contact – vaginal, oral, or anal. Ejaculation (when a man has an orgasm) doesn't have to happen for infection to occur. Gonorrhea can be passed from a pregnant woman to her baby during the birth process. This STD can also be spread to other parts of the body. A person can get an eye infection by touching infected sex organs (vagina, penis) and then touching the eyes.

### What are the signs of gonorrhea?

Women have symptoms of gonorrhea less often than do men. Most women who have this STD have no symptoms, or very mild symptoms that are often mistaken for something else, such as a bladder infection. When a person has symptoms, they most often appear within 2 to 10 days after having sex with someone who has the STD. But, some people can take as long as a few months to show symptoms. Common symptoms in men include a burning when urinating and a yellow-white discharge from the penis. Sometimes a man can also have painful or swollen testicles.

- If a woman has symptoms, they may include:
- Pain or burning when urinating.
- Vaginal discharge that is yellow or sometimes bloody.
- Bleeding between menstrual periods.
- Heavy bleeding with periods.
- Pain when having sex.
- Lower abdominal pain.

Both men and women can have symptoms of rectal gonorrhea – discharge, anal itching, soreness, bleeding, and sometimes painful bowel movements. When the infection is in the throat, there are often no or few symptoms.

## Are there tests for gonorrhea?

Yes. Getting tested is the only way to find out for sure if you have this STD. It is important to get tested right away if you think you have been exposed to gonorrhea, even if you have no symptoms. Remember that most women don't have symptoms with gonorrhea.

The most common test done, particularly for women, is called a *culture test*. For this test, a health care provider takes a sample of fluid from the cervix, urethra, rectum, or throat. This sample is then sent to a lab for analysis. Another test, called a *Gram stain*, can be done right in a clinic or doctor's office. A fluid sample is placed on a slide and looked at under a microscope. This test works better for men than for women.

## How is gonorrhea treated?

Antibiotics (medicines that kill bacteria) are used to treat this STD. The treatment of choice used to be *ampicillin*, *amoxicillin*, or some type of *penicillin*. But, these drugs have been used so much, they no longer work in treating gonorrhea. Other antibiotics are given now, such as *ceftriaxone* or *spectinomycin*. Many people who have gonorrhea also have another STD called *chlamydia*. Because of this, doctors often give a person antibiotics to treat both STDs. Sometimes *doxycycline* is given along with ceftriazone. If you are pregnant, you shouldn't take doxycycline. Let your health care provider know if you are or think you might be pregnant.

If you have gonorrhea, you should talk with your doctor about being tested for chlamydia and other STDs. Be sure to talk with all of your sexual partners so they can see a doctor for treatment right away.

## What happens if gonorrhea isn't treated?

Gonorrhea that is not treated can cause serious and life-long problems in both women and men.

In women, gonorrhea is a common cause of *pelvic inflammatory disease* (PID). PID is an infection of a woman's *pelvic organs* (uterus, fallopian tubes, ovaries) that can cause infertility (not being able to get pregnant). *Ectopic pregnancy*, where an egg implants in the fallopian tube, can also happen due to PID, which can be life threatening. PID can also cause long lasting, or chronic, pelvic pain.

In men, this STD can cause a painful condition with the testicles, called *epididymitis*. This can lead to infertility if the STD is not treated. This STD, if not treated, can also affect a man's prostate and cause scarring inside the urethra, making it hard to urinate.

Gonorrhea can spread to a person's blood or joints when not treated. When this happens, the infection can become life threatening. Also, when you have this STD, it is easier to become infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. People who have both gonorrhea and HIV are more likely than people with HIV infection alone to pass HIV to someone else.

It is important to get regular check-ups for gonorrhea and other STDs if you have sex with more than one person. Get a check-up even if you don't have signs of an STD.

## Can gonorrhea cause problems during pregnancy?

Yes. A pregnant woman can pass gonorrhea to her baby during delivery. This can cause blindness, joint infection, or a life-threatening blood infection in the baby. Treating gonorrhea as soon as it is found in pregnant women will lessen the risk of these complications. If you are pregnant and have gonorrhea, talk with your doctor about the medicines you can safely take.

## How can I keep from getting gonorrhea?

There are things you can do to keep from getting this disease:

- The best way to prevent gonorrhea or any STD is to practice abstinence (don't have sex). Delaying having sex for the first time is another way to reduce your chances of getting an STD. Studies show that the younger people are when having sex for the first time, the more likely it is that they will get an STD. The risk of getting an STD also becomes greater over time, as the number of a person's sex partners increases.
- Have a sexual relationship with one partner who doesn't have any STDs, where you are faithful to each other (meaning that you only have sex with each other and no one else).
- Practice "safer sex." This means protecting yourself with a condom EVERY time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

For vaginal sex, use a latex male condom or a female polyurethane condom. For anal sex, use a latex male condom. If needed, use only water based lubricants with male and female condoms. For oral sex, use a *dental dam* – a device used by dentists, made out of a rubbery material, that you place over the opening to the vagina before having oral sex. If you don't have a dental dam, you can cut an unlubricated male condom open and place it over the opening to the vagina.

Even though it may be embarrassing, if you don't know how to use a male or female condom, talk to your health care provider. The biggest reason condoms don't work is because they are not used correctly.

- Be aware that condoms don't provide complete protection against STDs. But, they do decrease your chances of getting an STD. Know also that other methods of birth control, like birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms don't protect you from STDs. If you use one of these methods, be sure to also use a condom every time you have sex.
- Limit your number of sexual partners. Your risk of getting gonorrhea increases with the number of partners you have.
- Don't douche. Douching removes some of the normal bacteria in the vagina that protects you from infection. This can increase your risk for getting gonorrhea.
- Learn how to talk with your partner about STDs and using condoms. It's up to you to make sure you are protected. The organizations in the "For more information" at the end of this FAQ have tips for talking with your partner. You can also talk with your health care provider about this.

- When you are sexually active, especially if you have more than one partner, get regular exams for STDs from a health care provider. Tests for STDs can be done during an exam. And, the earlier an STD is found, the easier it is to treat.
- Learn the common symptoms of gonorrhea and other STDs. Seek medical help right away if you think you may have gonorrhea or another STD.

## **What should I do if I have gonorrhea?**

Sometimes a person may be too scared or embarrassed to ask for information or help. But, keep in mind most STDs are easy to treat. Early treatment of STDs is important. The quicker you seek treatment, the less likely the STD will cause you severe harm. And the sooner you tell your sex partners about having an STD, the less likely they are to spread the disease to others (because they can get treated).

Doctors, local health departments, and STD and family planning clinics have information about STDs. The American Social Health Association (ASHA) has free information and keeps lists of clinics and doctors who provide treatment for STDs. Call ASHA at (800) 227-8922. You can get information from the phone line without leaving your name.

If you have gonorrhea:

- Get it treated right away. Studies suggest that having an STD increases your risk for getting infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.
- Follow your health care provider's orders and finish all the medicine that you are given. Even if the symptoms go away, you still need to finish all of the medicine.
- Avoid having any sexual activity while you are being treated for gonorrhea.
- Be sure to tell your sexual partners, so they can be treated too.
- Be sure to get a follow-up test to make sure that the infection has been cured.

## For More Information...

You can find out more about gonorrhea by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center (800-994-9662) or the following organizations:

### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

National Prevention Information Network

Phone Number(s): (800) 458-5231

Internet Address: <http://www.cdcnpin.org>

### **CDC National STD and AIDS Hotline**

Phone Number(s): (800) 227-8922

Internet Address: <http://www.ashastd.org/NSTD/index.html>

### **National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention**

Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/od/nchstp.html>

### **National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases**

Phone Number(s): (301) 496-5717

Internet Address: <http://www.niaid.nih.gov>

### **American Social Health Association**

Phone Number(s): (800) 783-9877

Internet Address: <http://www.ashastd.org>

### **American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists**

Phone Number(s): (800) 762-2264

Internet Address: <http://www.acog.org>

### **American Academy of Family Physicians**

Phone Number(s): (913) 906-6000

Internet Address: <http://www.familydoctor.org>

### **Planned Parenthood Federation of America**

Phone Number(s): (800) 230-7526

Internet Address: <http://www.plannedparenthood.org>

This FAQ was developed from fact sheets of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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